

“I Am the Gate”

Good Shepherd/Lamb Sunday

4th Sunday of Easter

Pastor Darwin Edwards

Today’s meditation is based on John 10:1-10. This is from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

¹“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Whenever I think about a door, two things often pop into my mind. The first is the mimicking Mynah Bird that belonged to one of my childhood neighbors that lived a quarter-mile down the street. This bird mocked its lady owner who constantly scolded her husband about closing the back door when he came home. The Mynah Bird would scream, “Shut that door! Shut that door! Shut that ___ door!” The other door that comes to mind is from a lively tune of the mid-fifties. Jim Lowe’s rendition carried the hit song, “Green Door,” to number one on the billboard chart for three weeks. It portrayed a young man lured nightly to a club from which emitted lively piano music, laughter, smoke flowing through the cracks – all behind the mysterious “green door” through which he wasn’t allowed entry.

Doors are fascinating. If one is locked, we want to get in. If one is open we want to close it. If we’re outside, we want to get inside and in today’s pandemic, we’re inside and want to get out of the door. Have you noticed the front doors of homes? They are varied in size, color and material. Each style adds character to the structure. Doors make possible exit or entry. Doors provide security. A person leaves the country and moves to the city. They are fascinated by the sounds and busyness of the city but rush home to seek peace, quiet and security behind a closed door. If someone enters our homes through the windows instead of the door, we might call it breaking and entering. However, if we invite someone to visit, we let them in through the door. Some of us are “back door” people and conjecture those who come to the front door are

either strangers or salespersons. For those we often peep out the window before we open that last barrier of security to the outside world.

Often entries do not have doors. I remember my visit to the Holy Land. To enter the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, one has to bow reverently to enter the small doorway. The United Methodist logo includes: "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors." It's a place where all are welcome. John Wesley used door as a metaphor for justifying grace. He use the house metaphor to explain the three types of grace. The porch is prevenient grace that is present in all. The door to the house is Jesus that justifies us with God and leads into the house. The rooms inside the house are sanctifying grace. Grace that fills the rest of our lives helping us to 'go on to perfection' – knowing and doing the will of God.

So, what does all that have to do with Good Shepherd/Lamb Sunday? I'm glad you asked that! We, in the United Methodist Church, follow the Revised Common Lectionary which consists of Year A, Year B, and Year C. Each year follows a schedule of four Scripture selections that deal with the liturgical season of the church and "in-toto" covers approximately eighty percent of the Bible. Well, we're celebrating the 4th Sunday of Easter today in Year A. Even though it is Good Shepherd Sunday, our Gospel reading doesn't mention that Jesus is the Good Shepherd – that comes in Year B's (next year) Gospel reading when we read John 10:11-18. This year we read in verses 7 and 9 that Jesus says, "I AM the gate." So, maybe we should call this "Gate Sunday!" I'm sure that makes no sense to you and probably bores you, but today's Gospel reading John 10:1-10 is actually part of a larger discourse. Though I won't read the whole discourse to you, in an effort to get to the meaning of today's lesson we need an understanding of the entire Shepherd Discourse.

Look at your library of Bibles and notice that in some translations, there is no break between 9:41 and 10:1. The story of the man born blind (a birth defect) in chapter 9 runs on into chapter 10 where Jesus interprets the meaning of the healing event. Thus, it is productive to read 9:1-10:21 to get the whole picture. In John (per theologian Karoline Lewis) the author often uses the same structural pattern of *sign, dialogue, and discourse/interpretation of the sign*. In these verses the *sign* is found in 9:1-7, the *dialogue* is found in 9:8-39, and the *discourse/interpretation* is performed in 9:40-10:18. Therefore, today's Gospel lesson, 10:1-10 is the epicenter of the interpretation for the story of the man born blind.

Jesus is trying to explain to the Pharisees, the disciples and the others in his presence that those who have come before the Incarnation, were herding (not leading) the sheep (those seeking salvation) in the wrong direction and requiring impossible means to gain the desired ends. In the story of the beggar with the birth defect, his neighbors and the Pharisees questioned him about his identity and who healed him on the Sabbath, trying to trick him into saying it was

Jesus. Anyone speaking the name of Jesus would be expelled from the synagogue and Jesus could be arrested for breaking the Sabbath rule. They believed that someone, the blind man but most likely his parents, had sinned to cause this birth defect. The beggar did not ask to be healed. Jesus spat on the ground and made mud (working on the Sabbath), place it upon his eyes and told the man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The blind man obeyed not *seeing* or *knowing* Jesus but only *hearing* his voice, as sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd. This whole event was a charade to expel the beggar and his parents while trapping Jesus. Twice they called the beggar to testify before they expelled him.

Jesus heard of the travesty and sought the beggar, and asked, *“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”* He answered, *‘And who is he sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’* Jesus said to him, *‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’* He said, *‘Lord, I believe.’*” Jesus antagonized the Pharisees insinuating that they were blind to the will of God and this poor beggar was no longer blind because he heard and believed Jesus before his vision was restored.

With the *sign* and *dialogue* complete, the writer of John moves into the *discourse/interpretation*. Jesus tells the Pharisees that his sheep need nourishment, security and hope, but they are supplying none. The shepherd (Pharisee failed to fulfill that role) should lead (not herd) them into the sheepfold for rest and protection and lead them out again to green pastures. ‘In ancient Palestine (per Rev. Dr. James B. Strobe) the shepherd would build a sheepfold with four high walls with thorns on top to keep out the thieves and wild animals. One wall had a gap slightly larger than the shepherd. The shepherd stood just outside the gap and called each sheep by name and inspected and tended their wounds as they entered the sheepfold. At night he would build a fire just outside the gap to ward off intruders and then lay down to sleep in the gap. Thus, the shepherd became the gate/door.’ Nourishment and security was gain by entering through him. In the morning the gate/shepherd guided them safely out.

The gate became the entry into safety and the exit to green pasture – nourishment. Jesus is the door. He is the entry into salvation and eternal life. Christ emptied himself and came to give us life and life abundantly. Jesus reminds us that there have been many hirelings that have come before him that only had their own self-interest. Many have come to bear false witness or bring fame to themselves. Only the prophet came to deliver the will of God but they were disregarded. Jesus, the Door, opened up heaven to all God’s creation, yet, allows free-will to make the choice of whom we would follow.

Eric Ritz reminds us that *“it is critically important when we open a door—that it is the right door. Behind the door might be David Koresh, Jim Jones, or Larry Applegate offering a ride on a spaceship to the heavens. This is why there is only space in the doorway for Jesus Christ. This is not Monty Hall’s ‘Let’s Make a Deal.’ Doors number one—two—three might bring you a treasure on earth, but only a sad disappointment in the matters of eternity. Choosing and entering the right door is a most serious business. There are those who will promise to provide the door—but they cannot deliver. Only Jesus the Christ IS the Door!”*

Who are the charlatans today that make all kinds of promises but cannot deliver? It reminds me of the bombardment of television commercials for consumables. I wonder about some of the celebrity evangelists and those who preach the 'prosperity gospel.' During this time of sheltering-in-place I have been able to watch many deliver God's word. Most are true to the Scriptures. Rare but occasionally, I hear promises that I cannot faithfully believe. However, many will rightly tell you that I don't have it all figured out either – and I would agree. Jesus is both the Good Shepherd and the Door. He is the unblemished Lamb that gave his life for you and me.

Beware of those who climb over the walls and do not enter through the Door, Jesus Christ. Our model could be the blind beggar who countered the Pharisees and listened to the voice of Jesus, obeyed and had his sight restored. The idols of this world continue to blind us. We lose sight of the Door, that fulfills the promises of God, because of the lure of superficial worldly toys and pleasures. Who or what are the thieves and bandits today that herd us astray? Many are common to us all but there are those that are unique to our own personalities. Beware, the serpent is ever among us, but our hope is in the Name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Door. The leaders of the Temple were the thieves and bandits that attempted to enter the sheepfold without going through the Door. They didn't believe in Jesus and wanted him crucified. Their hope was in themselves and their mutilated and embellished version of the Law. Christ came to complete the Law and give life removing death, the sting of sin. Christ calls us by name as he welcomes us into his sheepfold. If you hear and believe, you will no longer be blind. You will see the Risen Christ in one another and in his creation.

Eric Ritz tells this story: 'At the magnificent cathedral in Milan, Italy, there are three possible doorways to gain entrance to that building. Over the left doorway is carved an inscription that reads: "All that which pleases is but for a moment." Above the door on the right is written: "All that which troubles is but for a moment." Over the central door is the inscription: "That only is important which is eternal."' Which door will you choose?

⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.